Outcomes and Consequences of Workplace Bullying Incidents: An Indigenous South African Perspective

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Abstract – The purpose of the study was to determine the outcomes and consequences of workplace bullying incidences for the victim, bystander and organisation using South African indigenous perspective. Most studies on workplace bullying in South Africa were conducted using western approach with very limited use of indigenous understanding of the phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews were conducted amongst a combination of purposive sample and snowball sample of 21 indigenous employees. Therefore, a qualitative research approach was used. Findings of the study have identified three outcomes and consequences of workplace bullying through a qualitative research approach that contributed rich and insightful data. These three outcomes and consequences of workplace bullying are high turnover rate, compromised employee wellbeing and compromised performance. It is clear from this study's findings that workplace bullying incidences may result in negative outcomes and consequences. In practice, these findings can serve as an eye-opener and help organisations and institutions to initiate and establish anti-bullying policies that take into account the unique nature of indigenous people. This study emphasises that anti-bullying policies can play a significant role in combating workplace bullying. It is therefore suggested that the government enacts a law that addresses bullying rather than dealing with it through the channels of other negative behaviour such as harassment, which can serve as a guideline for handling workplace bullying.

Keywords – Workplace Bullying, Indigenous Knowledge, High Turnover Rate, Compromised Employee Wellbeing, Compromised Performance

1 Introduction

The concept of workplace bullying has over the years, become a well-established research topic. Initially the phenomenon was studied in school settings in which children were bullied by their schoolmates (Aquino & Bradfield, 2000; Pörhölä, Karhunen & Rainivaara, 2012). Olweus (1978), for example, conducted a study involving aggressive behaviour amongst school children. However, attention is also now focused on bullying in workplace settings. Furthermore, both industrial and organisational scholars recognise and study the phenomenon as a form of interpersonal harassment or counterproductive behaviour that tends to happen across demographic groups and all sorts of work environments (An & Kang, 2016; Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2020; Nielsen, Mikkelsen, Persson & Einarsen, 2020; Xia, Zhang, Dong, Huang, Pu, Luo, & Lei, 2023). Workplace bullying poses a major problem for individuals who are targeted, as well as related workers (bystanders) and organisations, regardless of geographical location.

Workplace bullying has impact on employees beyond the workplace (Christianson, 2015; Hoel, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2020). For example, it may have significant impact on individuals' personal lives, which may lead to suicidal ideation (Leach, et al., 2020; Luo, Wang, Zhou, Mao, Lang & Xu, 2023). It would appear that researchers tend to approach the phenomenon of workplace bullying from Westernised worldviews and knowledge perspectives or dominant knowledge systems of the so-called Western World (See, for example, Cunniff & Mostert, 2012; De Wet & Jacobs, 2013; Nielsen, Mikkelsen, Persson & Einarsen, 2020; Xia, Zhang, Dong, Huang, Pu, Luo & Lei, 2023). Jacobson, Hood and Van Buren (2014) alluded that interest in bullying behaviour started in Sweden, in the late 1960s when Heinemann (1972) defined this phenomenon as mobbing. Since then, Western perspectives have underpinned ideas of what constitutes the meaning of the concept, as well as how to measure it. In addition, the most widely used instrument to measure workplace bullying, the Negative Act Questionnaire, is based on the assumption that human behaviours are the same regardless of nationality or culture (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997). According to Loh, Restubog and Zagenczyk (2010), most studies on workplace bullying have also been based on Western samples (Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009; Hoel, Cooper, & Einarsen, 2020; Nielsen, Mikkelsen, Persson & Einarsen, 2020; Xia, Zhang, Dong, Huang, Pu, Luo & Lei, 2023). Therefore, causes and consequences of bullying behaviour are identified using Western approach.

In the South African context, over the years, a number of studies have been conducted on the phenomenon under study (See, for example, Cunniff & Mostert, 2012; Visagie, Havenga, Linde & Botha, 2012; De Wet & Jacobs, 2013, Conco, et al., 2021; Van der Westhuizen, 2021). However, an analysis of these studies show that they are predominantly a continuation of the work of overseas scholars with minimal original contributions from African knowledge perspectives. Therefore, Western knowledge of the causes and consequences of workplace bullying might not be adequate to incorporate indigenous, African understanding of workplace bullying because of cultural differences between Westerns and Africans. It would thus appear that there is a

need to investigate, understand and diagnose the causes and consequences phenomenon from an African viewpoint. Therefore, this study was conducted to close this research gap by investigating the outcomes and consequences of workplace bullying incidences and events from an indigenous South African perspective. In addition, the study hoped to contribute to an in-depth understanding of the causes and consequences of bullying behaviour.

Most studies related to workplace bullying are grounded in a Westernised worldview (Baillien, Neyens, De Witte & De Cuyper, 2009; Conco et al., 2021; Van der Westhuizen, 2021). Cross-cultural examination of workplace bullying has been rare (Loh, et al., 2010). In earlier research, evidence suggests that cultural beliefs and values may influence how individuals perceive and respond to aggressive acts (Salin, 2003; Tepper, 2007). The variation in workplace bullying because of cross cultural tendencies has also been considered by researchers (Akella, 2016). As a result, studies in the South African context have adopted Westernised definitions, understanding, measurement and interpretation of this phenomenon (for example see Schalkwyk, Els & Rothmann, 2012; Visagie, Havenga, Linde & Botha, 2012). It is however vital to note that there might be differences between Western and African perspectives of the world. Therefore, the outcomes and consequences of bullying behaviour might differ.

This highlights a need to study workplace bullying from an African perspective, to generate grounded or grass-root (indigenous) knowledge on the concept of workplace bullying. Issues of bullying might mean different things to people from deferent ethnic backgrounds, this further shows a significant need to study workplace bullying from different ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, using selected ethnic groups, this current qualitative study was conducted to answer the following research question: What are the outcomes and consequences of a workplace bullying incident for the victim, bystander, and the organisation?

2 Literature Review

This section presents the existing literature on workplace bullying, with specific focus on the theoretical and empirical literature.

2.1 Theoretical Literature

The underpinning theory used in this study was Novak's (1998) Learning Theory. Altman (2010) concur that Novak's theory offers an understanding of how actions of bullying and responses to bullying can be seen deriving from individualized conceptualizations of workplace bullying by those involved. In other words, on the off chance that we apply the concept of workplace bullying from Novak's (1998) theory we can comprehend the phenomenon through how a distinctive individual conceptualizes this phenomenon which may originates from earlier learning about bullying behaviour, which itself derive from past encounters. This individual meaning of bullying behaviour may affect decision of action on workplace bullying, which thus adds to personal encounters

of bullying behaviour. Therefore, these new encounters or experiences inform knowledge and meaning (Altman, 2010).

To take a straightforward illustration, maybe an individual employee's initially experiences of bullying behaviour was through bullying of a colleague, who was publicly humiliated by his manager during a meeting. Because of this experience, workplace bullying became significant and real issue in the workplace as the employee understood workplace bullying to be a concept that came to have meaning for the employee. As a results of this experience, an individual employee might come to understand bullying behaviour as a phenomenon that might occur during meeting.

2.2   Empirical Review

The consequences of bullying in the workplace are severely significant and negative not only to the target or bystanders and organisation, but to the society at larger (Escartin, Ceja, Navarro & Zapf, 2013; Høgh, et al., 2021). As a result, over the years, researchers as well as practitioners have recommended that organisations have to develop and implement effective interventions (Leiter, Laschinger, Day, & Oore, 2011; Escartin et al., 2013). There are three significant consequences of workplace bullying for the employees, organisation and the society namely; human, organisational and spill over or crossover.

Human Costs

Bullying behaviour may have different consequences to different employees. For example, in early research, the consequences of bullying include increased absenteeism (Magee, Gordon, Robinson, Caputi & Oades, 2017), struggle to maintain a coherent sense of self (Lewis & Orford, 2005), high sick leave, lowered self-esteem (Randle, 2003) and physical illness (Kivimäkia, et al., 2003; Tsuno, et al., 2022). Jonoff-bulman (1982) as cited in Nielsen, Matthiesen and Einarsen (2008) posit that exposure of bullying in the organisation may change an individual's awareness of their work environment to one of risk, danger and insecurity which may result in loss of productivity. It is very significant for the managers to consider the wellbeing of their employees.

Organisational Costs

There is a clear implication between the human costs of workplace bullying and the organisational costs as target encountering emotional and mental damages are more likely to be absent from work due to sickness (Sprigg, Martin, Niven & Armitage, 2010; Suggala, Thomas, & Kureshi, 2020; Boudrias, Trépanier, & Salin, 2021). According to literature, those employees who go to work they demonstrate lower performance due to this behaviour (Schat & Frone, 2011; Wu, He, Imran, & Fu, 2020), lower organisational citizenship behaviours (Afzal, Zamir & Sadiq, 2022; Saghih & Ilani, 2023), and higher counterproductive work behaviour (Hershcovis & Rafferty, 2012). Thus, this results to negative outcome for the organisation. Literature shows that organisations acquire indirect expenses as well, as meta-analytic outcome recommend that targets of workplace bullying report lower organisational commitment, life satisfaction, job satisfaction and higher turnover intentions (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Steele, Rodgers & Fogarty, 2020).

Spillover/ Crossover costs

Spillover or crossover is about how the experiences of an individual can affect the other individuals' experiences, and therefore, it is an interindividual phenomenon (Westman, 2006; Sarwar, Bashir & Karim, 2021). For example, the experience of the offensive manager may affect the attitudes of coworker concerning work environment. Whereas spillover refers to the degree in which participation of an individual in one area influences the individual participation and attitude in a different area and therefore it is an intraindividual phenomenon (Carlson, Ferguson, Perrewe & Whitten, 2011). For example, the experience of individuals in the workplace affects the experience of individuals in another circumstance, such as home environment. n instill green values to new employees at the beginning of their journey with their organisation.

3   Methodology

Narrative research approach was used in this study to gain indigenous insights on workplace bullying from a South African perspective. Therefore, participants were asked to narrate their story about the workplace bullying incident that they have experienced in the workplace. Tuwe (2016) highlights that storytelling has been a ritual for the African people. In this study, empirical research was conducted to determine the outcomes and consequences of workplace bullying. Furthermore, the constructivist worldview formed the basis of the study. In constructivist perspective, the researcher relies on the participant's views of the situation or circumstances being studied as much as possible.

Limpopo Province was used as the area of study, this is because of its diverse nature, with more languages spoken than any other province in South Africa. Limpopo Province consists of mainly rural communities comprising of different ethnic groups that have different cultures. Furthermore, Limpopo Province has a largely rural Black population with strong traditional values and worldviews (Boonzaaier, 2010). As a results, this provided more authentic culturally based perceptions of the phenomenon under study. The sample was gathered using both purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Face-to-face interviews with the participants were used to collect data. The data was gathered, and themes were identified using a content analysis technique.

The Turfloop Ethical Clearance Committee (TREC) of the University of Limpopo provided an ethical clearance certificate. Additionally, confidentiality was upheld when gathering the data. 21 participants formed part of the study. In analysing data, content analysis was adopted as the method of data analysis. According to literature, qualitative content analysis is widely used in exploratory and descriptive studies (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Klenke, 2016; Gläser-Zikuda, Hagenauer, & Stephan, 2020). All the data sourced from the interviews was analysed qualitatively through Microsoft Excel. Microsoft Excel was used in this current study to organise and analyse written responses from interviews and audio responses. Besides, studies have shown how Excel can be used for qualitative analysis using conditional formatting and other functions (Amozurrutia & Servos 2011; Ose, 2016).

4   Findings

Table 1 provides the themes that emerged from the analysis of responses from 21 participants. The analysis of the interviews produced three themes in relation to the outcomes and consequences of workplace bullying incidents.

Table 1: Outcomes & Consequences of Workplace Bullying

Theme	Frequency	Weight
High Turnover Rate	16	76.2%
Compromised Employee Wellbeing	18	86.7%
Compromised Performance	19	90.5%

High turnover rate was identified by 76.2%, 86.7% 64% reported compromised employee wellbeing as outcome and consequence of workplace bullying. Lastly, ninety-point five percent reported compromised performance as the result of bullying behaviour.

5   Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate outcomes and consequences of a workplace bullying incidence for the victim, bystander, and the organisation using South African indigenous perspective. Therefore, themes were used to structure the results of the study. These themes are discussed below

5.1   Theme 1: High Turnover Rate

Sixteen participants identified employee turnover as an implication of bullying behaviour. Turnover intention is considered to be the employee's intention to leave his or her current job and tendency to seek employment in other organisations (Jung & Kim, 2012). In other words, as stated by Simon, Müller and Hasselhorn (2010), turnover intention can be identified as intentions or ideas about dropping a job. According to literature, bullying in the workplace has been identified as the antecedent of job dissatisfaction, which in return leads to turnover intention (Chen, 2011; Xia, et al., 2023). Nielsen, et al, (2020) point out that workplace bullying may trigger the thoughts of escape behaviour, leading the victims of bullying to consider quitting the job in order to escape the feeling of being bullied even further.

Given this background, it is very clear that research participants of the current study also had intentions to leave, some resigned. For example, research participants concurred that they could not wait for the internship programme to come to an end so that they could be able to walk away from abuse. The research participants stated that those who were bullied wanted to leave the

organisation. Furthermore, participant 5 said: *"It came to a point that all I wanted was to leave this place because it was now toxic, I have had enough"*. Participants 15 and 16 also could not endure the pain, they resigned. Participant 7 resigned the job for an internship programme. Meaning that there was a pay cut. "*The situation was very bad I could not stay. I was just tired of having to think about what will happen the next month? What if I don't get paid? What will happen in two months*" (participant 7)? Five participants (3, 5, 8, 17 &18) also had turnover intentions. They were just waiting for other employment opportunities in different organisations. Therefore, organisations end up losing potential good quality employees due to bullying behaviour. Thus, organisations are also affected in terms of the money they have to use in recruitment, selection and advertising in order to get the right employees to replace those who resign.

There were, however, three participants (8, 9 & 10) who were forced to stay employed due to personal situation (family responsibilities) as well as gaining experience regardless of the unconducive working conditions. Participants who were employed on contract basis (internship) endured the negative treatment, encourage by the fact that the contracts will end soon. High turnover rate can be linked to the three significant consequences of workplace bullying identified in the literature. For example, in terms of human costs, employees' decision to leave their job due to exposure to workplace bullying may have negative effects on their physical and psychological wellbeing (Human costs Randle, 2003; Kivimäkia &Virtanen, 2003). Organisational costs associated to high turnover rate include costs related to replacement of resigned employees while the spillover or crossover costs involved the extra burden that employees who remain are forced to temporarily carry while waiting for replacements (Westman, 2006; Carlson et al., 2011).

5.2   Theme 2: Compromised Employee Wellbeing

Eighteen participants (n=18) identified compromised employee wellbeing as a major implication of bullying behaviour. The implications of bullying behaviour on employees are visible and cannot be overlooked. Research participant highlighted different consequences of workplace bullying incidents. Research participants reported how bullying behaviour have increased their stress levels. Other participants stated how bullying incidents have damaged them emotionally. Others mentioned that they were depressed due to bullying incidents. Participant 20 ended up seeing a psychologist. Participant 4 said *"I have internal anger and hatred. My day-to-day job is about pretending. I smile and pretend that everything is okay, knowing very well that nothing is okay"*. Participant 1, 2, 3 and 5 stated that workplace bullying incidents have turned the organisations into toxic work environment. Other participants talked about how bullying has discouraged and demotivated them from working (participant 6, 8, 10, 12, 18, 20 & 21). Compromised employee wellbeing was also identified as outcomes and consequences of bullying behaviour. Rosander and Nielsen (2023) reported that such behaviour may have severe consequences on emotional and physical fitness both bystanders and victims. Literature has shown that victims of workplace bullying can have psychological symptoms

anxiety, depression, sleep problems, burn out or increased substance use (Escartin, 2016; Haq, Ziaud-Din & Rajvi, 2018).

Compromised employee wellbeing can be associated to the three significant consequences of workplace bullying identified in the literature. For example, psychological or emotional exhaustion that victims and bystanders of workplace bullying endure are human costs (Randle, 2003), which may result in organisational costs such as employee lower productivity, reduced organisational commitment and job dissatisfaction (Harris et al., 2007; Schat & Frone, 2011) as well as spillover or crossover costs as a result of interpersonal conflict among colleagues due to emotional exhaustion and poor performance (Carlson et al., 2011).

5.3   Theme 3: Compromised Performance

The majority of participants (n=19) identified compromised performance as the outcome and consequence of workplace bullying.   The psychological strain of bullying behaviour on targets, which is a human cost consequence of bullying, has the potential of affecting their performance. In other words, they end-up not performing well in their jobs as they are expected. Employee level of performance plays a significant role in an organisation to achieve organisation's utmost goals. Performance is usually referred to what an employee of the organisation does or does not do at job (Daniel, 2019). As performance refers to a quantity and quality of outputs employees gives, poor performance as a result of bullying behaviour can be regarded as an organisational consequence of workplace bullying.

The research participants talked about how bullying behaviour has affected their level of performance. For example, participant 3 said: *"It affected my work, I never gave my work due diligence. I was not in love with my work anymore. The passion that I had was gone. So sometimes I was tactful on how to submit my work. Because no matter how early you submit your project files would always be delayed"*. Additionally, Participant 10 stated: *"she was making me doubt myself and thinking that I was a failure".* Participant 14 stated that due to bullying incidents, her productivity was compromised. Furthermore, participant 14 said: *"when I thought of going to work it was a burden to me"*. Due to bullying incidents, participant 18 stated that she became discouraged and demotivated to work. She lost the love that she had for her job. Therefore, performance was compromised. Participants 19 and 21 share the same sentiment.   Indeed, bullying behaviour can have a significant impact on the organisation.

Studies have reported that bullying behaviour have caused job dissatisfaction, higher rate of absenteeism, poor performance, less organisational commitment and turnover intention (Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter & Kacmar, 2007; O'Connell & Kung, 2007). Thus, the three outcomes and consequences of workplace bullying reported by the research participants are consistent with previous findings, which makes it imperative for organisations to address them in order ensure organisational success.

6 Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore outcomes and consequences of a workplace bullying incidence for the victim, bystander, and the organisation using South African indigenous perspective. In other words, workplace bullying incidences and events were studied from a South African indigenous perspective. Having a significant better understanding of workplace bullying incidences, this study can assist organisations to handle workplace bullying incidences to avoid high employee turnover, employee ill-health and improve employee performance. The results of the study clearly show the severity of workplace bullying on employee's (victims & bystanders) integrity, self-esteem, turn-over, career, emotional wellbeing, performance and commitment. This study recommends that organisations should develop anti-bullying policies taking into consideration diversity nature of the workforce.

The purpose of the anti-bullying policies should be clearly communicated to all respective stakeholders (employees, supervisors, managers and executive management). These anti-bullying policies should highlight severity of consequences (e.g. Demotion or dismissal) to those who are found guilty of such transgression. The anti-bullying policy created must emphasize a zero tolerance of bullying. This will also help organisations to respond adequately to bullying incidents and act promptly to avoid consequences. Furthermore, organisations should design and present training on workplace bullying for employees including the management regularly from a South African indigenous perspective.

Indigenous knowledge is a concept that has been studied before for many years, but its popularity has been to a minimum. Thus, this paper further contributes to the importance of indigenous knowledge. Furthermore, the results discussed in this study described the outcomes and consequences of workplace bullying by indigenous groups that they have experienced in their respective workplace. Nevertheless, results of the study were explored in detail to understand how they can contribute to the universal understanding of the phenomenon, for the possibility to propose workplace bullying theory from and South African indigenous perspective.

Most study in workplace bullying discussed and researched the phenomenon from a western perspective even in the African context, rather than from African indigenous point of view. Thus, the study revealed that even indigenous groups can experience bullying consequences in the workplace. Practical implications of the study highlight an integrated transparent system to management workplace bullying outcomes and consequences in all organisations. Such system will protect possible victims and bystanders from mistreatment and unwelcomed behaviour. This system will act as a bridge between victims and organisation to encourage employees to be able to report the perpetrator and for the organisation to be able to take responsive measures. In situations where participants reported the bullying incidents, management perpetuated bullying behaviour by not responding adequately when reported. It is important to note that, most perpetrators in this study were supervisors and managers. This implies that management promotes workplace bullying.

Thus, bullying should be discouraged from management level. To do so, management and Human Resource offices should come up with strategies and process which set out what bullying bahaviour is and how it should be discouraged and handled.

Nevertheless, like other studies, this research has its own limitations as well, but the objectives of the study were achieved. This study only focused on the ingenious groups in Limpopo province. More different indigenous group and from different ethnic groups (e.g. IsiZulu, Xosa etc.) could have been added to participant in the study. Nevertheless, different ethnic groups are found in different provinces. Besides, given the nature of the study probable it would have been difficult to get to participants in other provinces. The study excluded perpetrators perspectives on accounts of workplace bullying which would have added more subjectivity on the findings. Nevertheless, the nature of the study made it difficult to get participants who agreed to say they were perpetrators.

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